MNTN:QUEST

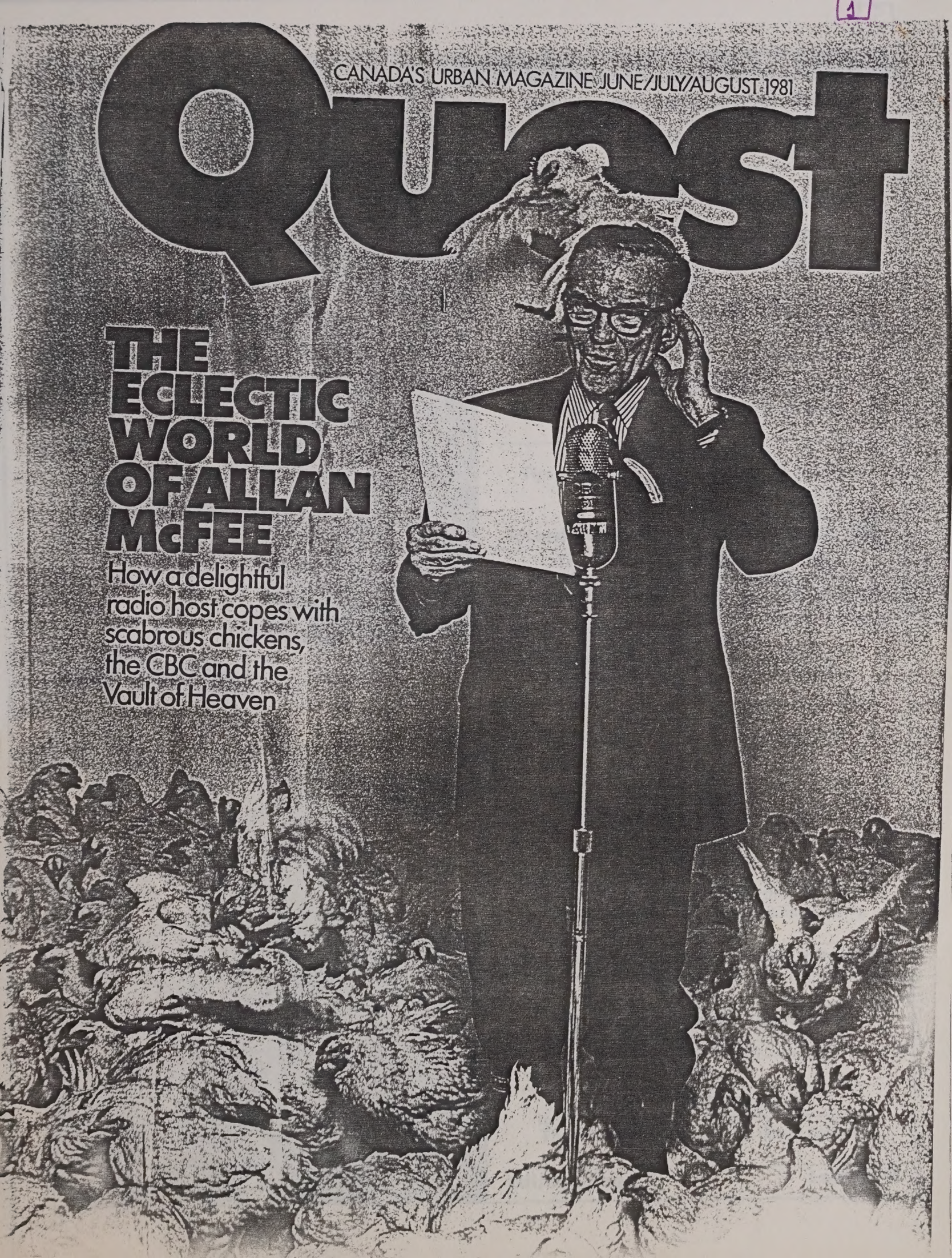
DEFAULT or SHORT VERSION

Mention of MN in Canadian Quest magazine,
July-Aug 81.

Calls me "Archangel"

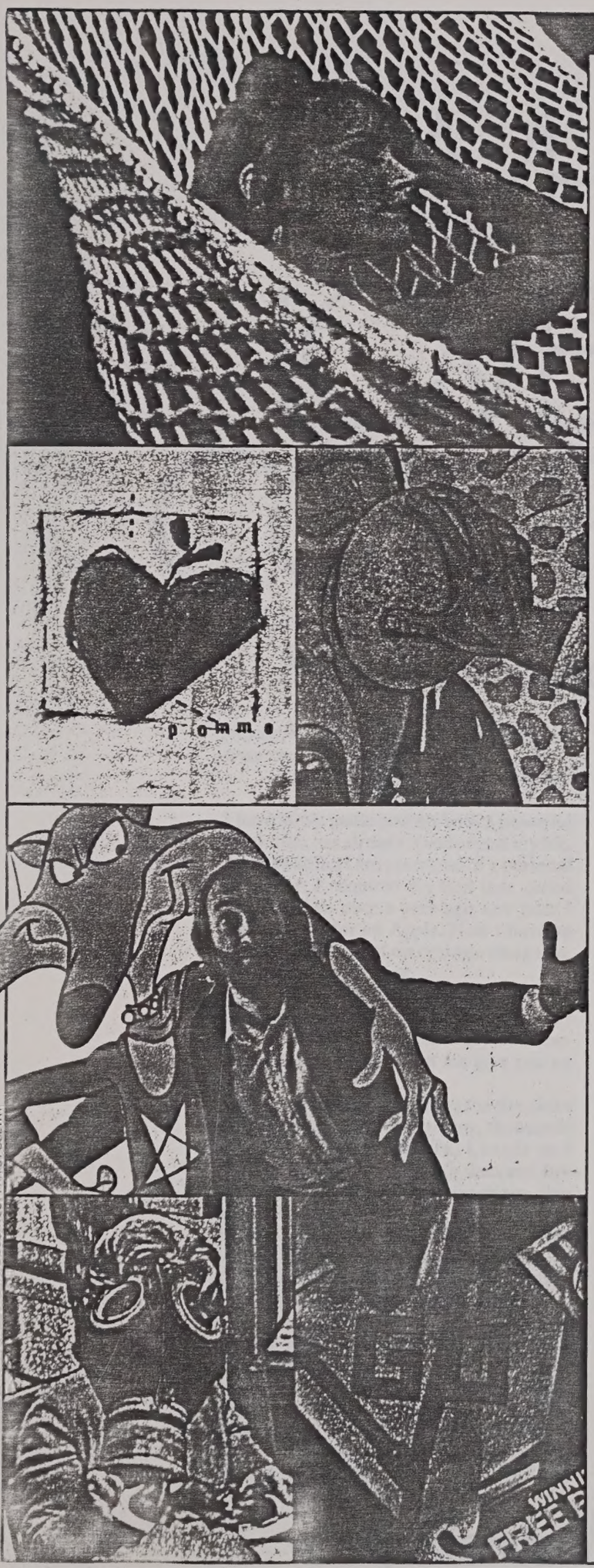
CANADA'S URBAN MAGAZINE JUNE/JULY/AUGUST 1981

Quest



THE ECLECTIC WORLD OF ALLAN McFEE

How a delightful radio host copes with scabrous chickens, the CBC and the Vault of Heaven



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WHY I LOVE MY COMPUTER

May the Source be with me

Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.
– Arthur C. Clarke's Third Law (1973)

I have lately made contact with a powerful magic that has already transformed my life. To be specific, I am possessed of a personal computer. I acquired my first one, called Sorcerer, just over a year ago and later I exchanged it for an Apple. Now I have an Apple at the heart of every single thing I do. *Everything*? Everything.

But what, I hear you ask, do you *do* with the damned thing? What does it do for you? Is it worth it? Or are you crazy or something? Gently, gently. Let me give you an example.

Time zone by time zone, as the sun sinks below the yardarm each evening, thousands of people all over America, Canada and parts of Europe retire to their dens and fire up their computers. Their machines give them the computer's traditional friendly beep of welcome, perhaps a disk drive whirs, and the video monitor begins to flicker with mystic runes. Quite frequently I join in this intercontinental communion.

I connect the Apple to my telephone and swiftly enter elaborate incantations and formulae into the keyboard. In obedience to my coded requests the system passes silent messages to me and I reply to them. After a brief dialogue my phone begins to issue a small high-pitched whine like a distant bewitched cat. The spells have worked. I am in contact with the Source.

The Source? That's a mysterious name, to be sure, but then mysterious names and languages are all part of the new personal computer ceremonial. Even to the seasoned user like me, there is something occult about the Apple and the Source, and some people, who feel threatened by computers, consider them to be devilish. Devilish they are not, in themselves, but I have found (as I have always believed) that a personal computer can confer upon the right-minded user certain remarkable hermetic faculties.

Cold reason tells me that the Source is in fact an elaborate program located in a large computer in McLean, Virginia. Nonetheless, something within me insists that it is really a free spirit, like Ariel, which ranges unbounded over the U.S., Canada and Europe, springing from any telephone jack whenever summoned.

For a modest fee I can invoke the Source by phone and then browse through an Aladdin's cave of computing services. First I would look to see if there was any electronic mail for me from other users of the network. Then I might consult the Wall Street reports by plugging into United Press International, or I may delve instead into the files of *The New York Times*. If I have a trip to make I can turn to the Source for airline bookings and if I have time to kill I can always while away an idle hour challenging the distant entity to a game of Star Trek or backgammon – a novel form of

BRUCE MAU

[stuff omitted]

By Richard Lubbock

WHY I LOVE MY COMPUTER

May the Source be with me

By Richard Lubbock

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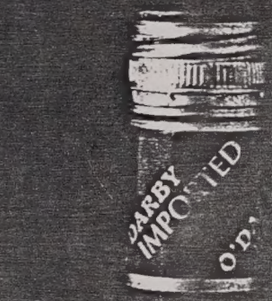

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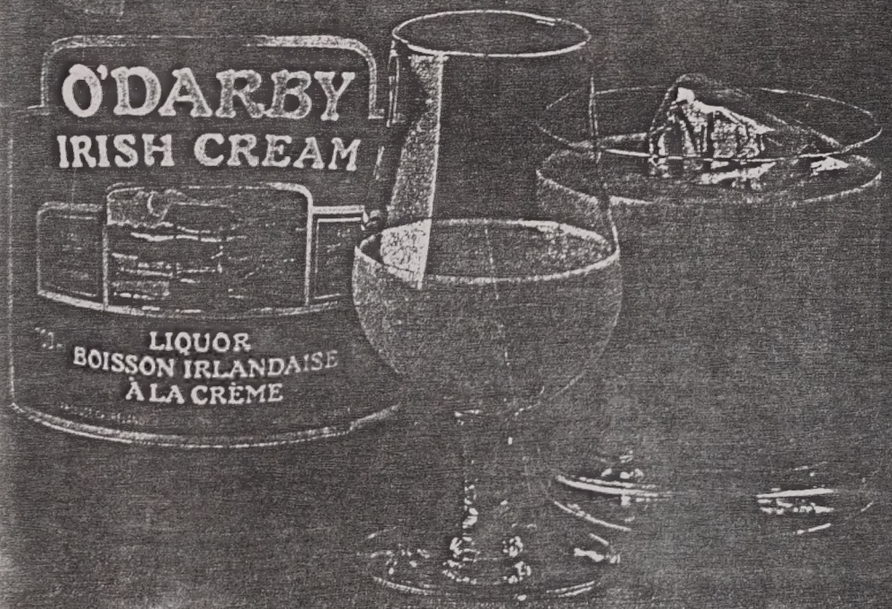

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English ("Bring me gold and jewels and all the riches of Araby!") and translating that into language a machine can understand:

program riches of araby (input, output);
var gold, jewels, oilwells: string;
bahrain, mecca, baghdad: integer;

begin procedure magic carpet;

and so on, which are the incantations a Pascal programmer might intone in order to get such a show on the road.

The thought sequence I have described, which begins with a human desire and passes through detailed machine-language instructions, culminating in human satisfaction, corresponds roughly to what is known in the trade as top-down programming. It is pretty much what the countess had in mind 100 years ago but a good many programmers haven't got there yet. There is a rewarding little book emanating from MIT called *Pascal with Style*, a volume of programming proverbs, the first of which is "Don't panic." *Pascal with Style* contrasts a number of other strategies with top-down, including the bottom-up approach, the inside-out or forest approach and the typical systems analyst approach. All these are still widely practised, and they are all pathological, because they put the programmer's convenience ahead of the user's. Little wonder then that the computer industry has acquired a public image rather like that of Mr. Legalman in Robert Ringer's gentle classic, *Winning through Intimidation*. Of Legalman, Ringer writes: "There are many predators in the jungle – animals whose survival depends on the killing of their prey. One of those predators is the attorney and he preys upon deals; Legalman's survival depends upon his ability to kill deals."

A predator of the computer jungle is Mr. Computerman, and his survival depends upon his ability to frustrate human desires. The more frustration he causes, the more work he whips up for himself, because he's always needed to fix the mess he created in the first place. Enlightened members of the computing community aim to banish Mr. Computerman from the business and propagate the more user-oriented top-down approach to programming. One of the most implacable enemies of Mr. Computerman is Ted Nelson, editor of the computer magazine *Creative Computing* and author of a paperback, *The Home Computer Revolution*, which is arguably the most stimulating book on computers since Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics* was published in 1948. Nelson is a seasoned programmer himself, of course, but he is an archangel among computer people, for he is literate. So exalted is Nelson among programmers that he actually talks plain English. There are not many like him around, I assure you.

Nelson is one of those visionaries we tend to belittle by calling them mavericks. He is more than a brilliant technician. He functions as an important humanistic critic of an industry that tends to despise its cu[illegible]

The souls of a thousand thousand medieval scholastics are dispersed, still disputing, among the computer's silicon crystals

ers. A voice like Nelson's should be heard. His polemics are not confined to the computer business. "Industry persists," he writes, "in turning out badly thought-out objects that nobody can understand." Think, for example, of any home videotape recorder and compare its inanities with the streamlined operation of an Instamatic or Polaroid camera. Nelson proposes a revolutionary 10-minute rule for the writers of instruction brochures: things sold to consumers ought to be understandable in fewer than 10 minutes of instruction. When Mr. Computerman objects that this cannot be done, Nelson snorts, "Balderdash! It is merely difficult." He points out that the people who design computerized amusement arcades understand the 10-minute rule and a lot of other things Mr. Computerman would rather hide from us.

Nelson asserts, as have many science-fiction writers before him, that the future of mankind, at work and at play, lies in front of some sort of interactive computer display, most likely a TV screen. The familiar typewriter keyboard will disappear, according to Nelson, to be replaced by the joysticks, wheels and other gadgets that are programming computers all over – in the amusement arcades. Already available for home use are programs you talk to.

There is another provocative idea up Nelson's sleeve: interaction. He insists that the interaction between the user and the computer system is of prime importance. This, he says, is a matter that IBM, a byword in computer mythology, has never bothered about, since the company has always dealt with corporate entities rather than individuals. The leading manufacturers of micros – Apple, Radio Shack and Commodore – have to deal with normal human beings. This emphasis on interaction will transform the industry, along with the people who use the machines.

Nelson stresses that an important part of interaction is the *illusion* the computer system creates. I recently had a taste of computerized illusion when I got the chance to fly a computer-simulated aircraft trainer at Ohio State University. It was the first time I had ever flown a plane. With a landscape projected ahead of me that moved as I shifted the controls, the air speed and altitude indicators wobbling as they would under my unskilled hands in real flight and the cabin being hydraulically rolled and pitched in accordance with my control movements, I quickly got lost in the illusion of "flying." When I stepped out of the trainer my hands were sweaty and my heart was racing. (I had actually managed to take off and land without crashing.) Nelson considers this ability of the computer to create a real-seeming world for the user to react with crucial to the proper and effective use of computers.

I have referred to a fundamental principle of computer programming, which I believe to be largely responsible for the invigorating changes in my life. This is the principle, implicit in Lady Lovelace's notes, dimly prefigured by top-down programming, and possibly destined to come to full flower within a very few years, that the correct way to program computers is to ignore the apparatus and concentrate only on the results. Results first, techniques afterward.

What this does, I suspect, is force you to return to the infantile mode of thinking. Recent studies of newborn and very young babies show that their thinking is much more organized and sophisticated than anyone ever suspected. Even without speech they seem to understand that their problem is "How do I get this (in my imagination) to happen out there?" As Nelson puts it, "Never mind the nuts and bolts. What's the dream?" The lesson is that users like me who actively design and program their own systems should ask themselves not "What can this machine do for me?" but rather, "How can I make the machine do what I want?" Some things, believe it or not, are impossible, as I have found to my weary sorrow.

To summarize. A little over a year ago I started as a complete novice with a computer, struggling to write programs in the barbaric computer language called BASIC. Since then I have averaged about two hours per day programming and exploring the possibilities, as a hobby. (What's wrong with that? Woody Allen is said to spend two hours a day practising his clarinet.) So I can guess that I have spent at least 850 leisure hours with my personal genie, possibly more. I am sure the experience has changed me. My goals have become clearer and my self-esteem has blossomed because I have successfully wrestled to the ground a powerful and stubborn opponent. I can vouch for several miracles, and I am sure the forces producing these emanate from that little typewriter thing over there next to the video monitor on the desk. Something inside that machine has spread like a virus into every crevice of my life, and I think I know what the infestation is: organizational wisdom.

A computer is not merely a collection of transistorized electric switches, although it could be so described. The architecture of its function embodies all the principles of logic and dialectic that have been discovered by mankind. It is the material expression of mathematical logic. It has a style – the style of Aristotle and Bertrand Russell. The souls of a thousand thousand medieval scholastics are dispersed, still disputing, among its silicon crystals. The moment you begin to use a computer you are invoking systems of classification and order that date back to the great Library of Alexandria 2,200 years ago, and beyond. The shade of Leibniz, divine librarian, metaphysician and rival of Isaac Newton haunts the copper corridors of its circuit boards. Every systems analyst who ever lived, starting with Plato, has contributed his mite to its making. So you see, when you bring a computer home you are taking as spouse an object saturated with the condensed mathematical and archival wisdom of the ages. Little wonder that it tends to irradiate its users.

I think that ownership of a personal computer in 1981 resembles ownership of an automobile in 1903. You're the first one on the block with the new toy and you pay a penalty. There are persistent, terrifying breakdowns, and the situation never seems to be completely under control. But there are joys as well. There is a certain pleasure in belonging to an elite, suffering fraternity. There are users' clubs for each major brand, to which hardly any women belong – Apple clubs, PET clubs, clubs for the TRS-80, just like in the old days of cars. As well as attending meetings of my local Apple users' group, I visit microcomputer conventions and exhibitions. And occasionally I drop in for a coffee and a chin-wag with the merry men at Computerland, who sold me my machine and stand by with advice and a shoulder to cry on.

There is a passage in *The Wind in the Willows* that reports Mr. Toad's rapturous musings when he encountered and fell in love with his first automobile: " 'And to think I never knew!' went on the Toad in a dreamy monotone. 'All those wasted years that lie behind me, I never knew, never even dreamt! But now – now that I know and fully realize! O what a flowery track lies spread before me, thenceforth!' "

The ecstatic words of Mr. Toad, uttered in the presence of an automobile, echo exactly my own feelings when I gaze fondly upon my computer. ■

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